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The Most Dangerous Time Since the Cuban Missile Crisis

By Daniel Ellsberg

(845 words)

[At this moment, we are where] the worst possible consequences of the U.S. and Israeli nuclear policies may shortly be realized. Either or both Israeli and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons could very plausibly be launched against Iraq within months, if the U.S. invasion being prepared leads Saddam Hussein to launch short-range missiles armed with chemical warheads against Israel or U.S. troops. Both countries have warned that such an act--which is highly likely to follow, or even shortly precede an American ground assault--will lead to the "annihilation" of Iraq, the "destruction" of its society. These are clearly threats of the use of nuclear weapons that President Bush has very accurately described to the U.N. as "weapons of mass murder." I do not believe, under this Administration or that in Israel, that these threats of mass murders are bluffs, or that they are meant solely for purposes of deterrence.

Saddam Hussein no doubt also possesses weapons of mass murder: nerve gas warheads and biological weapons. I believe that the chance he would use these, or turn them over to others, when he is not under direct ground attack, is close to zero. (His ability to be deterred and to refrain from using them even when under heavy air attack, not accompanied by an invasion of Iraq,

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has already been uniquely tested, eleven years ago). Thus, I believe that Saddam's Iraq, not under heavy attack, constitutes no threat at all to the national security of the U.S., or even with U.S. forces in the region, to its neighbors. Americans who believe otherwise have been totally misled by the deceptive assertions of the Bush Administration. But under the attack the U.S. is preparing, I believe the danger is very real that Saddam will use enough such weapons and trigger a U.S. or Israeli nuclear response: the first precedent for nuclear first-use since Nagasaki during World War II.

Thus, we may well be in the most dangerous nuclear crisis since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The very existence of the hundreds of Israeli nuclear weapons is not to this day officially admitted to the world. Still less is the Israeli stockpile opened for inspection and monitoring, any more than those of any of the other declared or undeclared nuclear-weapons states, including, very dangerously, those of Pakistan and India. Yet, I am sure that Israeli plans for the possible targeting of their weapons are underway in preparation for a highly likely "contingency" just weeks or months away.

Now the question to ask, regarding Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and others in the U.S. leadership, is "Can't they see this?"

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Unfortunately, these are the people for whom war is largely an abstraction, the so-called "chicken hawks." They predominate over all the generals, like Powell, Schwarzkopf, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for whom war is not an abstraction. The generals have privately opposed this drive because they know that war is a very serious matter that needs a justification that doesn't exist now. But since these hawks are in command, what can be their attitude about the use of nuclear weapons?

Clearly, plans have been underway in Washington and in the Middle East for the possible use of the nuclear weapons. This eventuality would be a situation in which hundreds to thousands of Americans would die shortly, and for which hundreds of thousands to millions of Iraqis and others would die. Now how could these planners be accepting this? My own guess is that these particular hawks may well actually want to see this probable consequence. How could they?

Because President Bush and others have openly proposed to base U.S. policy for the indefinite future on a readiness to launch first-use nuclear weapons, not on the scale of war against the Soviet Union, but against much smaller countries using so-called tactical or mini nukes. They want that threat to be credible and they want it to be legitimate. I think they look forward to

So a terrible prospect lies ahead.

In 1971, when the Pentagon Papers became public, then retired Senator Wayne Morse told me, "If you had given me what was in your safe at the time in '64, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution would never have gotten out of committee, and if it had, it would never have passed."

Now, I call on Executive Branch government officials who know that this war is disastrously reckless and illegal to do what I wish I had done in 1964: come forward with complete documents and tell the truth to Congress and the American public before it is too late.
